

# VIROCONIUM

*A new archaeological training centre*

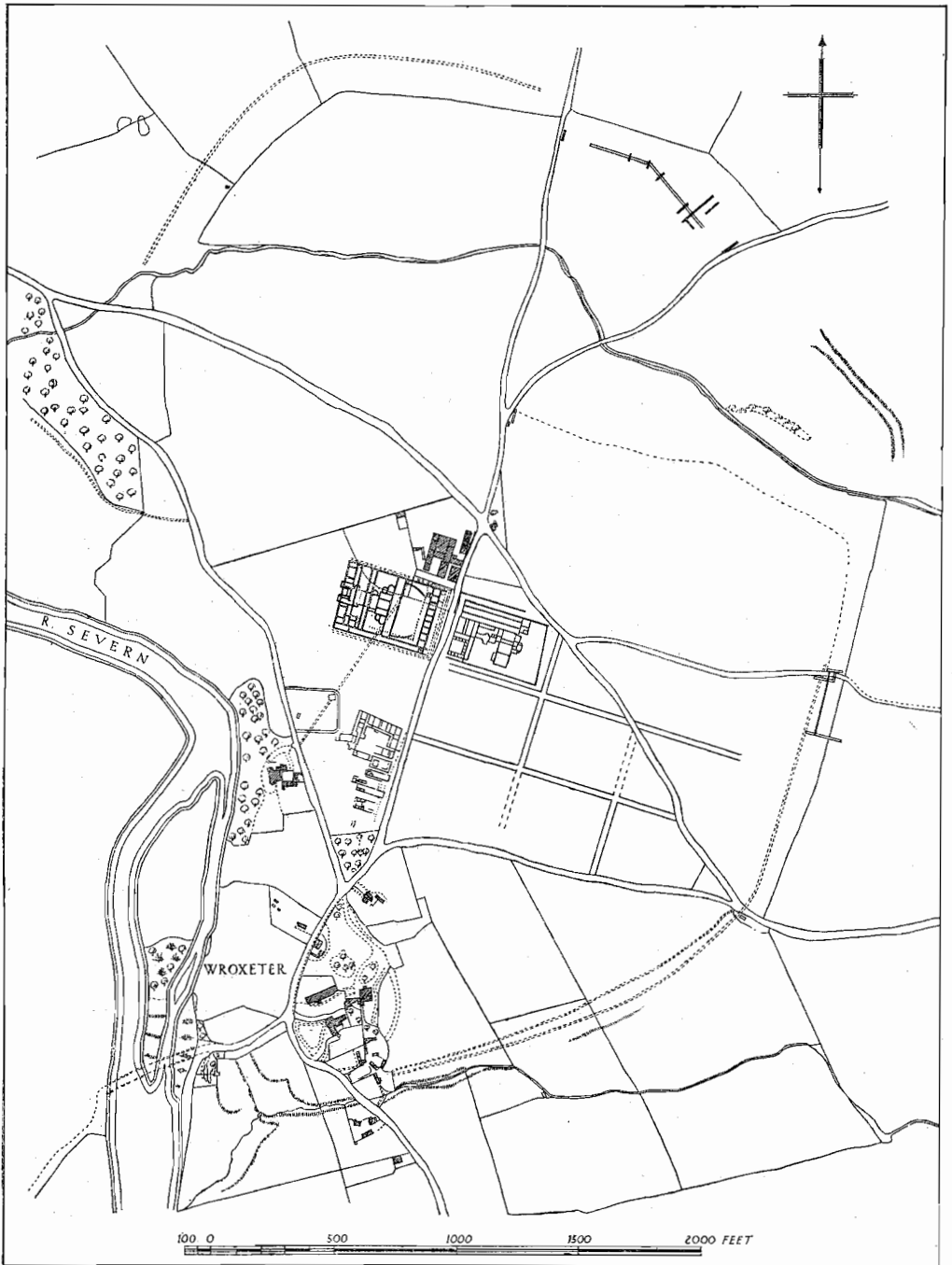
by GRAHAM WEBSTER

*Staff Tutor in Archaeology, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Birmingham*

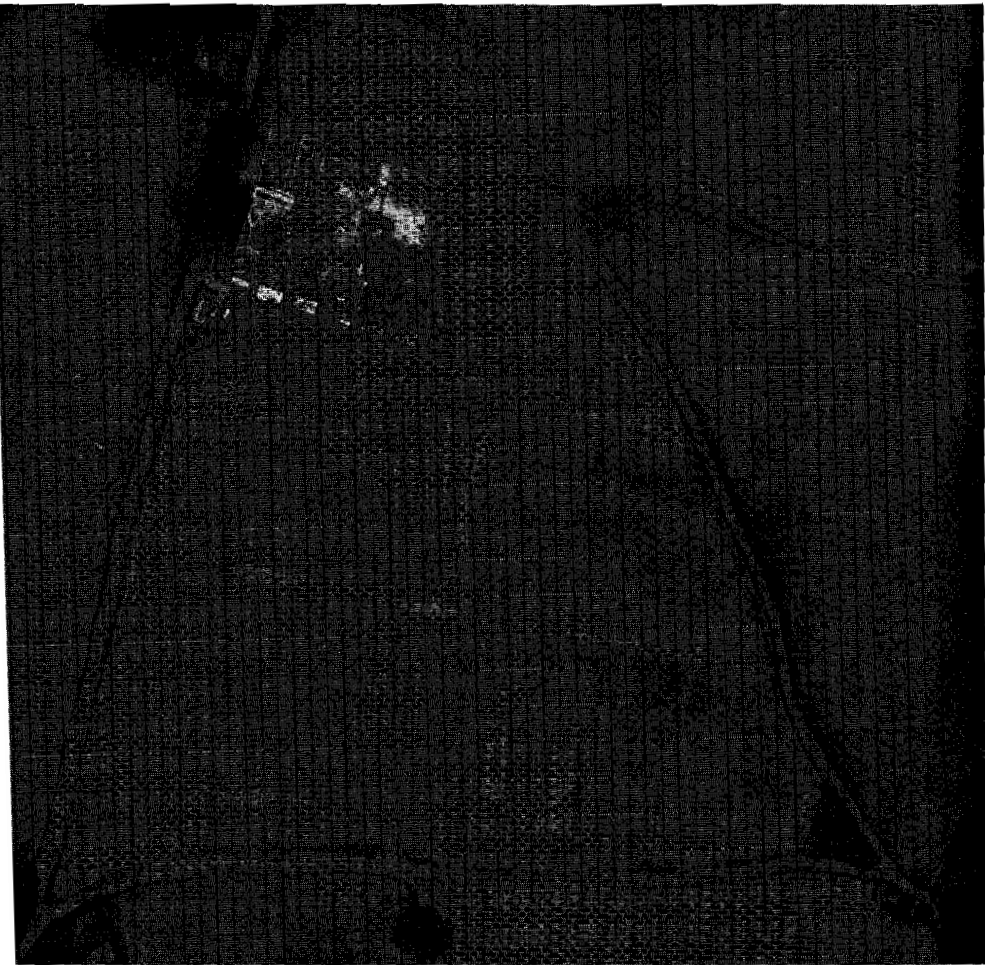
MANY of the larger towns of Roman Britain, like London, Canterbury, Lincoln and Cirencester underlie medieval and later cities. This makes their exploration extremely difficult since, not only are the earlier layers at least 8 feet below present ground level, but the foundations of later buildings have cut them away in many places. Also the medieval habit of burying rubbish in pits, which persisted almost to modern times, has left very little of the earlier remains in position, some areas being quite honey-combed with these intrusions, although their noxious contents, from which Time has not always completely removed their characteristics, belie the use of this verb. The result of all this is that when at great trouble and expense Roman levels are reached, the surviving remains are so slight, that they yield information only by intensive and careful effort. The survival almost intact of the temple of Mithras in London is one of these miraculous events which are of very rare occurrence. Of the Roman towns of any size which have escaped this fate, there are only four, Silchester, Caerwent, St. Albans and Wroxeter. Silchester was completely excavated at the end of the last century and the plans of its stone buildings recovered, but without any attention at all being paid to their chronology. Caerwent is partly built over by a modern village, while modern St. Albans, thanks to the martyrdom of its saint, was built on the other side of the river leaving the Roman town almost clear of modern buildings. Of the four, the most spectacular and relatively unexplored is Wroxeter, the Roman *Viroconium*, the cantonal capital of the *Cornovii*.

The line of its defences can be traced in the fields up to the edge of the River Severn where it seems to have been lost, possibly in landslip along the steep river bank. This area covers at least 180 acres and within it lie

scattered a farm, church, vicarage and a few cottages. Almost the entire area is under cultivation. Excavations have taken place in limited areas and among one of the first to take a serious interest in the site was the great engineer Telford, whose excavations were recorded in the manner of their time. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Shropshire Archaeological Society began on the excavation of the large public building known as the Baths. These remains were left exposed and suffered much decay until the Ministry of Works took over the site after the recent war and consolidated what was left. A series of excavations carried out at the beginning of this century by J. Bushe Fox, south of the Baths and west of the main north-south road, represents the first careful work on the town to match against modern standards. These three reports were published by the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1913, 1914 and 1916. For the first time, it was possible to demonstrate some of the complexities awaiting the excavator of a town site, but at the same time a firm basis was laid down from which conclusions about the early development of urban life could be drawn. Work elsewhere has since shown how difficult and positively dangerous it is to generalize about towns on the evidence from one or two sites. The next important contribution came in 1942 with the publication of the excavations carried out by D. Atkinson in 1923-27 on the Forum. The construction of this vast public building, 265 feet by 395 feet, was dated by the fortunate discovery of fragments of a very finely cut inscription, the lettering of which is every bit as good as the classic example of Trajan's column. Opened in A.D. 129, if that can be taken as the implication of the inscription, the Forum was destroyed by fire at some time late in the second century. In the destruction levels, interesting remains of the imperishable stocks of pottery and whetstones were found in the shops along the portico. Perhaps the most important discovery was that of an incompleated bathhouse below the Forum. Started towards the end of the first century, this very finely planned and constructed building was never finished but left derelict. This posed some difficult historical questions about which, even now, it is impossible to do more than speculate. It did, however, contain the germ of an idea which was developed by Miss K. Kenyon when she tried for a short spell to wrestle with the problems of the much larger complex of buildings to the east of the Forum and which had been partly exposed in the nineteenth century (*Archaeologia*, 88 (1940)).

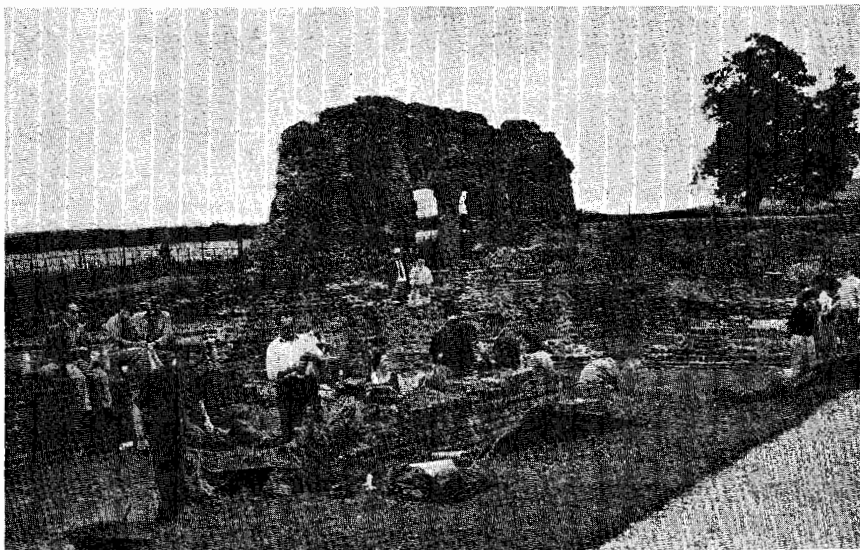


VIROCONIUM—PLAN OF CITY. Reproduced by kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London, from *Archaeologia*, 88.



*Photo: A. Baker*

PLATE I  
Air photograph of Wroxeter, showing crop marks of buildings south of the Baths



*Photos by courtesy of The Birmingham Mail*

An archaeological excavation course at work on the Romano-British site at Viroconium, and in the lecture room at Preston Montford Hostel (Summer 1957)

*[to face page 55*

It was argued that there had been a reversal of plan for the public buildings; on one side of the main street, early baths were replaced by the Forum and on the other an early Forum replaced by the Baths. That there had been a late first-century building left in a derelict state on this site, there is no doubt, and it does bear some resemblance to part of a Forum but beyond this are serious difficulties revealed by more recent work.

It will now be seen that in spite of this valuable work only a few domestic buildings and one public building had been thoroughly explored and a start made on another. What of the remaining 170 acres or so? On the analogy of Silchester, one might have argued that much of this area was open space, possibly fields or gardens. The rapid development since the war in the technique of aerial reconnaissance has helped to dispel this illusion. Wroxeter was built on a gravel and sand plateau of glacial origin and this well-drained subsoil is an important factor in the origin and development of crop-marks. After an early drought, ripening cereals produce the most spectacular results and airborne observers at critical periods have the good fortune of seeing parts of the town plan unrolled below them in all its detail. Some of these have now been photographed by Dr. S. K. St. Joseph and Arnold Baker (Plate I). Their impressive records make it quite clear that the Roman town was very largely built over. What these photographs do not, of course, reveal, is the date and history of these buildings and only the topmost structures are usually seen. They do, however, add other and unexpected features.

One of the long-standing problems of the site is the whereabouts of the legionary fortress. Tombstones of soldiers of the XIVth Legion, found along the Roman roadside, indicate the presence somewhere near of that legion which was in Britain in the middle of the first century. Wroxeter is well-placed strategically as a base for a thrust into central Wales up the Severn Valley and, appreciating the Roman method of "divide and conquer", it would seem to be one of the ways of dealing with the British tribes. There are indications from the Roman historian Tacitus that it was probably in this area that Caratacus fought his last desperate battle. But as soon as Wales had been conquered and held by A.D. 75, there was no longer any need for military units to be stationed at Wroxeter. Air photographs have been carefully studied for signs of military works. A small auxiliary fort has been found to the south of the town and double ditches

with a right-angled corner have been noted to the north-west of the Forum. Some day more definite evidence will be produced of the legionary base; until then the search must continue.

Excavation already undertaken as adult training schemes on the Baths site has already at this early stage produced its surprises. In the open central area of this complex of buildings are the remains of earlier structures in use before the public building was conceived. Instead of a few ephemeral timber buildings of the first century which is what was expected, there were much more substantial remains with concrete floors, with domestic occupation going on well into the second century. Below these levels are other timber phases and it now seems that there were three or four periods of house building, before the site was occupied by the Baths. This poses very difficult structural and stratigraphic problems which require careful detailed work and study. When one combines this with the great mass of upstanding walls, the site can be said to have almost everything to satisfy the training requirements for the Romano-British specialist.

It will now be clear that Wroxeter offers to the students of Roman Britain opportunities for work not easily paralleled elsewhere and it is in many ways ideal for the training of students in the techniques of excavating and study of Roman methods of building. In recognition of this, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of Birmingham University is establishing on the Baths site, which is under the guardianship of the Ministry of Works, a permanent centre for adult training courses. This will consist of two huts for working, lectures and storage which are generously being given by the Foyle Trust of Birmingham. The Field Studies Council is playing a significant part in this scheme by providing the University with hostel facilities at their new centre at Preston Montford. Accommodation has been made in a separate hostel for 24 students and 4 staff on a scale, thanks to the participation of the University, of very reasonable comfort for adults. Each student has a separate cubicle and divan bed. There is a comfortable common room and adequate washing facilities and meals are taken at the main centre. A special lecture room has been donated through the generosity of the Walker Trust. The first experimental season has seen a most successful and happy mutual collaboration effected between the permanent centre staff and their University guests. The scheme obviously

has great potentialities. The area is particularly rich in archaeological sites of all periods about which little is known. The Welsh Marches, with its turbulent history, offers complex patterns of fortifications for the excavator and field worker as well as the military and social historian, to say nothing of the geographers. Apart from the three training courses in archaeological technique which will be "hardy annuals", consideration will be given to other aspects of field work. Next year it is hoped to run courses on the identification and survey of earthworks and Dark Age archaeology as well as an experimental archaeological field course for senior boys and girls.

Archaeology as a subject has much to commend it to the adult student in search of a serious pastime. Not only does it offer spells of hard physical work and fresh air but it is all for a purpose and one's energies are productive of new knowledge. It is one of the few subjects now left in which the amateur can still play an effective part. Professionalization has been slow to develop, as there is no commercial factor, and the enormous richness and variety of ancient sites and objects scattered over the whole of Great Britain make a worthy harvest, ripe for gathering by the industrious amateur. But it is not a game for the casual or dilettante. Useful work can be done only by those who take the trouble to learn and be trained and submit themselves to the discipline the subject requires. There is a widespread popular interest today, thanks to television, in archaeology; this is doubtless ephemeral and will pass. There is also a growing body of devoted amateurs prepared to spend much of their leisure exploring their local sites with due care and attention to detail and eventually publication. On these men and women much of the future of British archaeology depends. Sites are today being swept away by normal commercial development and road and house building, and it is impossible to measure the loss. Only the keen vigilance of the local amateur can rescue useful information about our past from this modern maelstrom which sweeps, with growing speed, so much of the litter of earlier civilizations into irretrievable limbo.